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## Mutualism, massive and the city to come: jungle pirate radio in 1990s London

Article (Accepted Version)

Cordell, Tom and James, Malcolm (2021) Mutualism, massive and the city to come: jungle pirate radio in 1990s London. Soundings, 77. pp. 109-120. ISSN 0038-1861

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## **Mutualism, massive and the city to come: Jungle Pirate Radio in 1990s London**

**Tom Cordell and Malcolm James**

One icy Friday in December 1991 Londoners woke up to find themselves breathing in a throwback from the city's past. Overnight, a thick toxic smog had wrapped itself around the city, covering the streets and reaching out into the countryside, where it was held in by the chalk hills that edge the capital's sprawl.

The smog had arrived at an unrelentingly grim time for London. The demonic energy of the 1980s had run dry, leaving a town mired in the depths of recession. Alongside daily reports of lay-offs and corruption, national news obsessively gazed backwards, cycling through highlights of the Second World War as each reached its fiftieth anniversary.

Meanwhile, what felt like - but was *never* called - a war, dragged on, as Irish Republicans attempted to bomb the British out of their centuries-long occupation of Ireland. By the time the smog had cleared on the following Monday, there had been three more IRA attacks on the capital, bringing that year's total in the city to seventeen. London seemed unable to escape its past: exhausted patriotic mythology clashing with the reality of a post-industrial city living through the fag end of a colonial war.

**Pic 2 A city with no vision for the future insert near here**

But that weekend, creeping through the empty spaces of London and the surrounding countryside, were radio waves carrying fragments of the future. Anyone flicking across their FM dial could hear it in the gaps between the BBC and commercial stations - the Friday-to-Sunday broadcasts of a new kind of music, illegally beamed across the city from improvised studios in empty flats, via aerials on tower block rooftops. A unique sound - breakbeats, live spoken vocals, and bass lines. Jungle!

Hertfordshire massive, Dulwich massive, wicked reception in that part of town; Stratford massive, Ilford massive, picking it up good over the east region. Bigging up Antony and Amy, bigging up Nicky, not forgetting Danny ... This one goes out to the Capital.

DJs Remarc and Flirt, on  
Weekend Rush, 104.3FM, 1993

### **From the ruins of social democracy**

All of the youth shall witness the day that Babylon shall fall  
Sampled in Splash – Babylon, 1994 (from the film *Rockers*,  
1978)

If the London of jungle music was riven with decay, then the origins of that rot were political. Over a decade, Thatcherite politics had eroded the institutions of post-WW2 social democracy promoting in its place a new economic model based on large scale privatisation of state-owned industries, deregulation of business and finance, reduced

state expenditure, all alongside tax cuts for the rich. Skilled industrial jobs were replaced with non-unionised low paid, low-skill service-sector work concentrated in the south east of England. Many of these policies were learnt from Enoch Powell, an ambitious sometime Tory politician who, from the 1960s, had promoted them under the banner of “free market economics”, today better known as ‘neoliberalism’.

Powell’s economic vision - shaped by his membership of the neoliberal incubator group the Mont Pelerin Society - was a hard sell in the social democracy of the post-WW2 era. It after all threatened to destroy the security and affluence of large numbers of voters. But Powell’s ideas gained traction, tapping into national melancholia, and appealing to white England’s anxieties around the loss of Britannia and the reversal of imperial rule. Placing himself in the role of a prophet, Powell insisted that the inner cities were the breeding grounds for a forthcoming catastrophe, when black migrants from the Caribbean and south Asia would rise up and overthrow the ‘white man’.<sup>i</sup>

Margaret Thatcher continued Powell’s legacy. She invoked the racist terror myth of the inner-city to excite the bigotries of her largely suburban and market town electors, and appealed to law, order and hostility against outsiders and disrupters to win support for a set of policies which would accentuate inequality in British society.<sup>ii</sup>

*Pic 3 Inner city riots became a formative feature of life for Londoners. Brixton Riots 1981. Picture: Kim Aldis CC license [Insert near here](#)*

Organised working-class power presented a barrier to this vision, and to overcome it, Thatcher’s government worked to destroy the manufacturing sector of the economy and its unionised workforce. The outcome was mass unemployment, and the devastation of working-class communities across the country, including in many inner-city areas. That economic cosh was backed with violence from an increasingly militarised police force, directed at black and working-class urban communities. The ensuing riots became a formative feature of life for Londoners, Brummies, Liverpoolians and Bristolians, as well as becoming fodder for near-daily national television reports of conflict between state and denizen - spectacles that helped to reinforce Thatcher’s electoral power.

By the early 1990s, most forms of organised resistance to Thatcherism had been defeated, yet much of the social-democratic fabric remained - in particular a benefits system significantly more generous than today, and large amounts of low-cost and secure council housing. These remnants made it possible for many young Londoners to live with some detachment from the intense demands of the world of work, and to refocus their lives around social bonds often built around cultural tastes. Jungle was the defining musical culture of this young London.

To the suburban Tory voters who’d backed Thatcher and her successor John Major, the tower block - run by socialist councils and home to multiracial working-class communities - became the symbol of all that was wrong with Britain. But jungle pirate radio flipped that symbolism on its head, appropriating the tower block as the locus of an alternative cultural infrastructure, for the people of the inner city demonised by mainstream politics.

Jungle pirate radio both charged and reached beyond the grimness of the early 1990s, side-stepping the London of finance, media and political power to speak to an audience of young, multi-ethnic and predominantly working-class Londoners on their own terms. Reaching across the city into the privatised spaces of a generation - cars, teenage bedrooms and prison cells - it re-assembled urban society into a place that was less 'Capital' and more 'London Town'.

*Pic 4 Pirate tower over the city insert near here*

It sounded like London, it sounded like us. We were hooked ... The Weekend Rush 92.3FM crew, MC Shabba, Dollars MC, Shockin and a bunch of others ... referenced places we knew, things we were growing up with, even mentioned people's names we were familiar with, even if it was just a shout out on the radio.

DJ Target 2018, p19<sup>iii</sup>

South London crews, all the HMPs giving you respect.

MC Evil B Rude FM 1996

There had been UK pirate radio before - broadcast from ships in the 1960s, and later from illicit land-based transmitters - satisfying a need for greater musical choice than provided by regulated radio. Legislating against radio piracy, the 1990 Broadcasting Act responded in characteristically Thatcherite manner to the demand for this kind of radio by encouraging private companies to open new stations funded by advertising. The result was a proliferation of identical sounds shaped by commercial needs. Jungle pirate radio rejected this sterile commercial logic. Instead, it pioneered new forms of low-cost cultural production rooted in community and place, speaking to an urban audience that did not have the spending power needed to attract mainstream advertisers.

Jungle pirate radio emerged just as newly affordable technology - pagers and mobile phones - made it possible for the pirates to establish two-way connections with their audience, relayed through the radio studio - in what can be seen as a pre-figuring of social media. From testing the reach of the signal to complex dialogues, this connectivity came to define youth culture - a stream of shout-outs to listeners who'd called in, name-checking their locations, defining the boundaries of an alternative A-Z and a new constituency called the 'massive'. Each station had its own identity reflecting the varied texture of London north, south, east, and west.

### **High frequency, low bandwidth**

We will control all that you see and hear.

Sampled in *Controllin On Remand*, 1993 (from *The Outer Limits* tv series)

*Pic 5 Call and response: DJ, MC, and the massive insert near here*

Jungle pirate radio was precious. With shows live, fleeting and prone to being taken off-air by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), every FM broadcast was eagerly anticipated. Across London each weekend, thousands of Junglists hung over

their cassette machines ready to record Kool FM's 'Friday night slam'. The one-off character of live radio gave cassette recordings added object value. Monday, walking to school, the recorded tape weighed expectantly in the pocket before beginning its journey in the sharing and copying economy of friends. The tapes were sometimes played to groups through a traditional hifi and speakers but most often they were played on a device that (like Thatcherism) had launched in 1979, the pocket-sized cassette player with earphones - generally known as the Walkman. The carnivorous effects of early Walkmans had to be routinely mitigated by using a pencil to twist chewed tapes back to life. Echoing the era's political direction, the Walkman enabled the privatisation of the once collective experience of listening to music, and the cassette tape's movement between collective and individual listening modes mirrored the transitional state of 1990s urban society.<sup>iv</sup>

Mid-week there was no choice but to listen to whatever music was at hand. Trips to friends' houses became a musical and cultural education: Stevie Wonder, Stan Getz, Jimmy Cliff, Dennis Brown, Fela Kuti, hip hop and soul told stories of families, and of unrelated cultural circuits, as music was shared. Listening to vinyl records on these visits mapped a knowledge of the musical migrations that had shaped the city and its periphery.

Jungle embodied that experience. Born in the 1960s and 1970s, many key players - such as DJ Hype, Paul Chambers, Congo Natty, and Fabio and Grooverider - had previously played reggae, dub, hip hop, rave, soul, and funk on an older generation of pirate stations, as well as on live sound systems. Jungle was the composite of these predominantly black sounds and the diasporic tastes of city and suburban communities, overlaid onto beats that unified the fragmentary sources into a continuous flow that ran at the speed of the future city. Samples referenced old sci-fi shows, Westerns, gangster and teen movies from the States, as well as films from a broader global perspective then rarely seen on British television - kung fu films from Hong Kong, and the rebel outputs of *The Harder they Come* Jamaica. Alongside gunshot samples and gun play track titles, they celebrated rebel masculinity. All that was over-laid, particularly on pirate radio, with a fixative of male popular cultural commentary in which Martin Scorsese films were digested alongside Michael Jordan feats and Premier League football scores.

### **The force is electric**

Alarming evidence of the lengths radio pirates have taken to protect their stations. They've turned the tops of tower blocks into fortresses. Police and council officials made the discovery when they tried to break into an apparently empty council flat in Hackney, in Hackney, in Hackney  
ITV news report sampled by Dica & Ben Intellect, 'Can't stop the Pirates', *Weekend Rush Part IV*, 1993

Weekend Rush was one of the earliest jungle pirates - an ironic name in 1990s London, where the law still enforced boredom on Sundays by demanding the closure of shops and pubs. It was based at the edge of Hackney Downs, on the Nightingale Estate - a typical late-1960s inner-city council estate with six 21-storey tower blocks surrounded by low-rise housing. Decaying through poor maintenance and management, the estate was a relic of the last concerted effort to modernise urban

Britain three decades before. Through the 1980s and 1990s the area had been devastated by recession and its aftermath, with unemployment running at over 20 per cent - and double that for black residents.

Pic 6 Nightingale estate, Hackney. Image courtesy Prof Miles Glendinning [insert near here](#)

If 1990s London was grim, Weekend Rush definitely wasn't. An old off-air tape recording from December 1992, of DJ Remarc's twentieth birthday, encapsulates the humour of the time - a bunch of young men in the studio mucking around and taking the piss out of each other; reflecting London humour back to their listeners.

In July 1993, TV and newspapers splashed the story of a raid on Weekend Rush by the combined forces of the Metropolitan Police, Hackney Council and the DTI. In the TV report, an officer at Stoke Newington police station alleges that the pirates are operating as cover for organised drug crime. The next weekend another Hackney pirate, Kool FM, responded:

You'd think the Hackney Gazette would have something better to write about ... And the Evening Standard. So much wicked things happening in the world and you're writing shit like that. You're a bunch of jokers!

Two months later the Met was forced to admit that bent officers at nearby Stoke Newington station had been routinely fitting up innocent black residents for drugs offences, with officers themselves supplying heroin and crack across Hackney.

Towards the end of the year, BBC's Arena strand broadcast *Radio Night*. Sat within the celebration of formal, national radio was a 15-minute film about Weekend Rush (in the introduction, host David Attenborough sighed at its very mention). Cutting from news footage of the July raid to a jungle remix sampling the same TV report, director Nigel Finch peeled back the layers of dishonest media and police myth-making to give rare voice to the pirates. One interviewee explained:

There ain't one station out there that gives people what they want. Not one legal station plays the music that we wanna play ... if I was making a load of money [from organised crime], I wouldn't be dressed like this for starters; wouldn't be living 'round this area, wouldn't even be in this area.

Shot with the Nightingale's six towers as a backdrop, Rush's MC Gaffa told the viewers:

Most of us round here, the only thing we got in Hackney is music. Everyone in Hackney is talented, but no one has got nothing in Hackney. There's a load of musicians, there's a load of DJs, there's a load of footballers, there's loads of sportsmen in Hackney, but cos we don't get a chance to do something, now we're doing something off our own steam, our own back, we get cut down for it, saying we're dealing with big drugs and big corporations. It's all pony. Pony.

## Inna year 3000

Pirate radio had defined a new ethereal territory for London, but it was at raves that the massive forged a new social order in the flesh, as legal and illegal parties rose up in the city's dead zones. Abandoned meat warehouses, nursing homes, cinemas and music halls (sites of former industry, welfare and leisure) were appropriated in defiance of Thatcher and Powell's vision of the inner city. The rave, like pirate radio, incubated a collective London, subverting individualism at 160bpm. At its best, it pioneered a model of urban coexistence, indifferent to difference, binding the Junglist massive together in rhythms of catharsis and pleasure, faster than the capitalist speeds of the time. With the collective energy often but not always reinforced through Ecstasy - which enhanced empathy and diminished ego - the rave functioned as a palliative for the pain of a society being dragged from collectivism to individualism.

### Pic 6 Jungle rave, 1990s insert near here

As the 1990s rolled on, Jungle's celebration of the London unloved by the mainstream became ubiquitous.

Enter I am the Don,  
Enter with some new slam,  
up to Stoke Newington,  
Clapton, Dalston,  
hold up your hand from Tottenham...  
pick up the crew from west London,  
pick up the crew from south London,  
pick up the crew from Brixton, Croydon, Peckham ... Hack-a-ney, Finsbury,  
Highbury, Piccadilly,  
right on the mic is Shabba D, on the way to Battersea,  
L-O-N----- D-O-N ...

MC Shabba D, One Nation NYE 1997

By the late 1990s, the urban terrain was changing. Gradually, the high-rise council blocks integral to pirate radio transmission were being demolished. As a Hackney Council representative interviewed in the 1993 Arena documentary made clear, eliminating the pirates was one of the objectives: 'We have plans for the [Nightingale] estate, we have plans for regeneration ... And I'm afraid that pirate radio stations are not going to succeed here.'

In 1997, Tony Blair's New Labour came to power, promising to rescue the inner city from decay. The razing of council estates and former industrial land continued; a tabula rasa policy in which private developers were now invited to profit from association with 'urban' culture, the sanitisation of the city and ever-increasing property prices. The myths of rebirth and the symbolism of safe urban chic drew in the middle classes to curtail the vibrance they otherwise fetishised. The roll call of places name-checked in pirate shoutouts to Clapton Park, Pembury, Packington, Holly Street and Stonebridge were now debris in a capital flow. And as the urban fabric was reshaped, so the inner-city population that made up the junglist massive were diffused and displaced by an influx of young professionals from the suburbs and shires.

The record shops, bars, clubs and rave venues that comprised the entrepreneurial arm of the junglist massive were replaced with new online possibilities, decoupling place from culture through everywhere-but-nowhere content delivery. Yet the cultural memory of the pirates lived on, as Stormzy explains:

I know a lot of grime artists started off on pirate radio, but I missed that era, I was way too young. I was MCing in the playground, spitting lyrics over mobile phones - Sony Ericsson Walkman W810s, the Teardrop Nokia phones, all of that. Vital equipment! I never even had a DJ set where a DJ's playing vinyl and I'm spitting.<sup>v</sup>

Jungle made life in 1990s London electric. It was mutualism, it was massive, and it was charged with the speed of the city to come. As the zombie of Powellism rises again, we can mourn jungle's passing without desiring its return. Rather, we must absorb the alternatives to dominance it laid down, as we nourish those being born anew. Jungle provided the minor key for the 1990s. Our task is to scan the dial for that tell-tale crackle today.

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<sup>i</sup> In *The Rise of Enoch Powell* (1969), Paul Foot makes the compelling case that Powell's adoption of the politics of race was for political expediency in his quest for power. From 1964 to his death in 1998 Powell was given a platform by the British media, and in particular the BBC, to espouse this politics of racial division. The 'rivers of blood' speech, in which he prophesied the reversal of racial domination, was given to the Conservative Association in Birmingham, 20 April 1968. See also Shirin Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance*, Manchester University Press 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Most notoriously, in a 1978 *World in Action* interview, Thatcher told the national TV audience that she shared white fears of being 'rather swamped by people of a different culture'. For more on Thatcherism see Stuart Hall, 'Popular democratic vs authoritarian populism: two ways of "taking democracy seriously"', in Alan Hunt (ed), *Marxism and Democracy*, Lawrence & Wishart 1980; Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order*, Macmillan 1978; and Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism*, Lawrence & Wishart 1983.

<sup>iii</sup> DJ Target, *Grime Kids*. Trapeze 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Bull, *Sounding out the city: personal stereos and the management of everyday life*, Berg 2000.

<sup>v</sup> Dan Hancox, 'How British MCs found a voice of their own':

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/31/british-mcs-stormzy-jammz-little-simz-krept-konan-novelist>.